

# BOOKS & THE ARTS.

## In the American Grain

JACKSON LEARS

**CULTURE AS HISTORY:** The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century. By Warren I. Susman. Pantheon. 321 pp. \$22.95. Paper \$12.95.

Historians often speak of their discipline as if it were an endless construction project. Scholars are praised for assembling concrete blocks called solid monographs that provide "a firm foundation for further research." This production model is reinforced by patterns of promotion and tenure at many universities, where "scholarly productivity" (often defined quantitatively) is the key to advancement. The unstated purpose of all this production, of course, is a final account of the past "as it actually happened"—in the Prussian historian Leopold von Ranke's famous phrase. Fortunately for historians that goal remains elusive, even though the most sophisticated techniques of social science are used in pursuit of it.

If analytical models and quantitative techniques borrowed from the social sciences have challenged easy assumptions and cleaned up sloppy thinking, they have also been a mixed blessing for the writing of history. The quest for precision through social science techniques (combined with a parlous job market) reinforces the prudent professionalism of the production model. Under its aegis, history has become more plodding, specialized and narrowly monographic than ever before. By now the best social science-oriented historians, such as Herbert Gutman and Lawrence Stone, have recognized the problem, and urged historians to reconnect with a wider audience. But so far little progress has been made. Instead of a single historical edifice, majestic in its Beaux-Arts eclecticism, we have dozens of squat structures, each as drab, formless and impenetrable as a concrete bunker.

While most historians huddle in these bunkers, defending ever smaller patches

of real estate, there is and has always been a more fruitful way to conceive of the writing of history. Some historians have imagined their craft to be part of a continuing conversation, embedded in the culture of the present, reclaiming the past, refining its meanings for the future—a conversation that includes many voices. Not confined to professional journals or bureaucratic idioms, this conversation is often impolite and impassioned; it honors thoughtful speculation as well as the careful marshaling of data.

Warren I. Susman, who died April 20, was one of the best representatives of this other historiographical tradition. His collected essays pose a fundamental challenge to ossified patterns of thought. The essays are conversational in the best sense—they are animated by a human voice. Susman was an inspired talker, whether in classrooms, at professional meetings or on the printed page. His characteristic rhetorical mode was a series of probing and sometimes unanswerable questions. He was volatile, unpredictable, sometimes outrageous, capable of both crankiness and immense generosity. He was especially hospitable toward young scholars trying out new materials and methods. He never published a monograph, but he exerted enormous influence through his fugitive pieces in obscure journals as well as through his personal presence. The presence could never be packaged, but the essays are between two covers at last.

Susman presented himself as a cultural historian who sought "to discover the forms in which people have experienced the world—the patterns of life, the symbols by which they cope with the world." He was, in other words, concerned with questions of consciousness not susceptible to the precise measurement required by the production model. This enterprise has a long and honorable lineage which stretches from Jacob Burckhardt to Johan Huizinga. But in recent decades, at least in America, the phrase "cultural history" has become a portmanteau containing all kinds of intellectual baggage. It is worth sorting through the baggage, if only to clarify the nature of Susman's achievement.

Cultural historians can be roughly di-

vided between those who study canonical texts and those who look at culture anthropologically. Despite the immense popularity of formalism in literary criticism and art history, there are still a few intrepid souls who try to locate and examine works of high culture amid the messy details of their moment. Carl Schorske's *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* is the most successful contemporary example of this genre. But the anthropological approach has won far more converts in recent years. It seeped into American historiography during the 1940s with more than a tinge of nationalistic sentiment clinging to it. The leading historians of the post-World War II era, whether they followed Daniel Boorstin in celebrating American culture or Richard Hofstadter in criticizing it, all focused on the pragmatic, entrepreneurial values Americans allegedly hold in common. Their anthropology was implicit but pervasive, and shaped the assumption that American culture constituted a unique and indivisible way of life, cemented by a unified system of beliefs.

By the 1970s that assumption had been rejected both for methodological and political reasons. The influence of Fernand Braudel and the *Annalists* had finally reached American shores, revitalizing positivist tendencies in the profession and promoting a disdain for imprecise talk about "national character" based largely on unrepresentative elite sources. Historians began to redirect their attention to the microcosmic worlds of township, family, neighborhood and sisterhood, discovering diversity at every turn and redefining cultural history in the process. At the same time intellectual historians, preoccupied with locating more popular sources and side-stepping charges of elitism, began calling themselves cultural historians. The use of anthropology became explicit and self-conscious: anthropological theory, especially the work of Clifford Geertz and Mary Douglas, became a tool for prying open the door of the slave quarters, the saloon, the Victorian parlor. With imagination and dexterity, historians examined the symbols and rituals that glued those little worlds together. But many paid almost no attention to the larger world of power and politics.

In 1976 Eugene Genovese complained that all this anthropology was little

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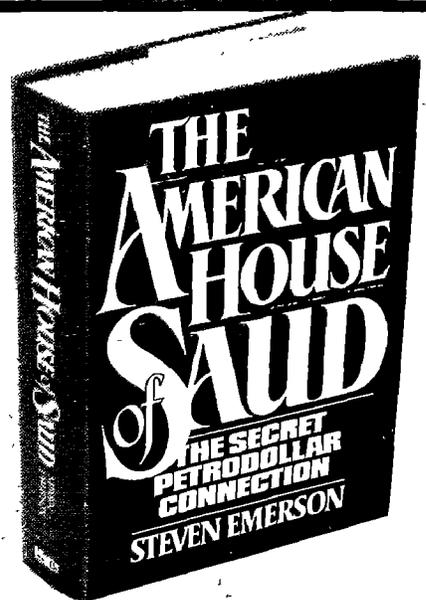
more than a "bourgeois swindle," a sentimental celebration of community which neglected the essential Marxist question, Who rides whom? Genovese had sparked a revival of Marxist historiography with a series of books on American slavery. Inspired by the work of Antonio Gramsci, he departed from orthodox Marxism in his determination to take culture seriously, arguing, for example, that the paternalistic code of Southern planters shaped their sense of class leadership and defused potential protest. Among British Marxists, E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams had been demonstrating a similar sensitivity to culture for some time: Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* played a major role in transforming the Marxist idea of culture from a static "superstructure" to a shifting formation of attitudes and practices that constantly interact with class and power relations. The growing prestige of Gramsci signaled the return of a genuinely dialectical Marxism. The phrase "Marxist cultural history" was no longer an oxymoron.

The newer versions of cultural history provided a meeting ground for historians with very different interests: Marxism, anthropology, intellectual history. What they had in common was a preoccupation with questions of ideology that demanded interpretation as well as measurement. What were the inner meanings of the evangelical camp meeting, the political campaign, the nickelodeon? What significance did participants and audiences attach to these cultural forms? The resurgence of cultural history reflects some historians' efforts to shake off the constraints of the production model—to climb out of their bunkers and revive older traditions of synthesis. Maybe that is why the most important achievements in recent cultural history resist easy categorization: David Brion Davis on the emergence of slavery as a "problem" in Anglo-American thought; Lawrence Levine on the secularization of Afro-American folk thought; Rhys Isaac on the *embourgeoisement* of colonial Virginia; Lawrence Goodwyn on the Populist movement's challenge to the "received culture" of corporate hierarchy.

Susman's work, too, defies categorization. He was omnivorously curious, widely read in a variety of theoretical traditions. He chastised the simplifiers in his field with the wisdom of Walter Benjamin and Mikhail Bakhtin

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long before those critics became fashionable adornments of academic discourse. He was no fieldworker in historical anthropology, beating the bush to rediscover pre-industrial enclaves of kin solidarity and workplace democracy. He was more at home on the boulevard. Indeed Susman might be characterized as a brilliant *flâneur*, sauntering through the metropolitan culture of twentieth-century America. Like Benjamin, he mastered the art of *flânerie*: creative idling combined with perceptive speculation. The essay form is its best expression.

The speculative spirit of *flânerie* can also create problems. Susman sometimes overlooked the elite origins of mass-marketed cultural forms, treating them as if they were direct expressions of popular sentiment. This could lead to the same kind of sweeping generalizations that characterized the cultural history of the 1950s. Yet it is easy to forgive this flaw when confronted with Susman's psychological sensitivity and his extraordinary powers of synthesis. He knew that cultural artifacts can embody nameless yearnings, inchoate anxieties, and was willing to explore that swampy psychic terrain without the crude maps of psychohistory. Even more impressive was his uncanny ability to see patterns of meaning overlooked by others. Unlike most students of popular culture, Susman did more than rescue circuses, cartoons and movies from oblivion: he demonstrated their relationships to more "serious" cultural forms. I know of no other historian who could move so effortlessly from *The Maltese Falcon* to *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*, from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to Mickey Mouse. Everything was grist for his mill.

Susman's gifts are evident in the range and variety of these essays. Written at various times during the last quarter-century, they indicate the undiminished vitality of his thought. There are stimulating pieces on the frontier thesis, the World's Fair of 1939 and the problems historians face in exploring the new communications media of the twentieth century. But perhaps most remarkable is the series of essays on the 1930s.

Dismissing the legend of the Red Decade, Susman presents a much more complex and compelling picture. He argues that the group that holds the key to the cultural significance of the Depression is the broad American middle

class—the skilled workers, shopkeepers and middle managers for whom economic insecurity was an unfamiliar specter. Their dominant response to joblessness was not the heroic resistance celebrated in Clifford Odets's plays; it was fear and shame. The prolonged Depression brought longings for psychic as well as economic security, for a sense of belonging to a larger whole, for a secular mythology that could dramatize mass participation in a glorious enterprise. It was not surprising that an age of fear and shame would redefine success as knowing *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (published in 1936) and psychic health as a matter of "adjusting" to the needs of the group. Nor was it surprising that the same age would embrace the vision of a classless, undifferentiated American *volk*, sustaining their way of life against desperate odds—the vision embodied in the poetry of Carl Sandburg and Archibald MacLeish, in W.P.A. murals and even in the "Americanism" of the Communist Party during the heyday of the Popular Front. The vision was popularized by elites in New York and Hollywood, sanctioned by the pop anthropology of "national character" and made manifest in the experience of World War II. The oppressively nationalistic culture that emerged after World War II—the culture that led historians to emphasize consensus values and that produced so much chatter about "conformity"—was not a reaction against the Red Decade but a fulfillment of its deepest yearnings.

What I have sketched is one major theme of a complex argument. Susman provided a new framework for understanding a crucial period of our recent cultural history. He also punctured some leftist pieties. Others have noticed "a kind of sentimentalism, a quality of intellectual softness" in the Popular Front Americanism of the 1930s, but Susman was the first historian on the left to explore his own tradition's inabilities in such unsparing detail, down to and including this statement by a Young Communist Leaguer at the University of Wisconsin:

Some people have the idea that a YCLer is politically minded, that nothing outside of Politics means anything. Gosh no. They have a few simple problems. There is the problem of getting good men on the baseball team this spring, of opposition from ping-

pong teams, of dating girls, etc. We go to shows, parties, dances and all that. In short, the YCL and its members are no different from other people except that we believe in dialectical materialism as the solution to all problems.

Susman turns this burlesque into an explicit challenge in "Socialism and Americanism," which warns socialists against "playing the Americanism game" by reinforcing capitalist culture in the guise of reforming it. "We have contributed to the making of mass culture without developing any position from which to evaluate it," he writes. This problem has plagued American dissent throughout the twentieth century. It has proved extraordinarily difficult for dissenters to imagine an alternative culture that could effectively resist the mainstream's power to absorb it. In his critique of Popular Front Americanism, Susman confronts a dilemma that many less thoughtful radicals have been content to ignore.

I wish the same could be said for the baffling introduction to the collection (excerpted as "A Dialectic of Two Cultures" in *The Nation*, February 16). When you compare it to most of the other essays here, it scarcely seems to have been written by the same person. Susman states that the purpose of the essays is to understand "one of the fundamental conflicts of twentieth-century America . . . between two cultures—an older culture, often loosely labeled Puritan-republican, producer-capitalist culture, and a newly emerging culture of abundance." The transformation from old to new was marked by shifts in ideals: from rigid character to magnetic personality, from self-denial to self-fulfillment. The *raison d'être* of the new culture was a positive state of material well-being, to be achieved through the ministrations of professional therapists and the pursuit of consumer goods. In Susman's view, the new world of department stores, amusement parks, movies and mass-marketing has got a bum rap from cultural critics. Leftists in particular should escape the iron cage of pessimism and recognize the liberating potential in our consumer society, in spite of all the faults.

It is always refreshing to find an academic who would just as soon go to a Mets game as endure another uplifting cultural event on campus. Susman reminds us that there is a good deal of vitality and fun in what has been stigmatized as mass culture. He also grasps

the irony of historians' tendency to idealize pre-industrial communities they would hate to inhabit. Without question, the "culture of abundance" has brought us many comforts and pleasures we ought not to take for granted.

But it is difficult to avoid asking some questions—in the spirit of Susman himself. How can one discuss abundance under advanced capitalism without at least a nod to the cruel ironies inherent in the word? How does American abundance look to the colonized peoples of the world who have been forced to sacrifice their raw materials and indigenous traditions so the fattest nation on earth can have steaks, scuba gear? How can one ignore the profoundly antidemocratic tendencies that underwrote this new culture, even within the United States: the growing concentration of wealth, power and knowledge in the hands of a few managers, technicians and administrators? How could a socialist forget who rides whom? And how could he claim that "virtually every critic of consumer or therapeutic society brings with him or her an ideological position and values representative of the older order"? Lewis Mumford, Robinson Jeffers, David Riesman, Paul Goodman and Allen Ginsberg, to mention just a few, can hardly be lumped together, let alone placed alongside unctuous fundamentalists and puritanical producer-capitalists. In fact, one could argue that a secularized puritanism is more evident in consumer culture than in its ablest critics, that the frantic imperatives of self-improvement and productivity have undermined the possibility for a genuine leisure ethic in twentieth-century America. The most powerful critiques of consumer culture have been rooted in longings for a realm of pleasure and freedom beyond the performance principle of advanced capitalism.

The best criticism realizes that consumer culture is more than the sum of individual purchases. It would be a dour and ridiculously superficial criticism that only saw the individual consumer, buying a new dress or enjoying a good meal. Criticism ought to target the systemic features of consumer culture—the pressures organized to promote a way of life characterized by relentless getting and spending, at the expense of human and natural resources, for the primary benefit of the elite.

The fundamental problem with Sus-

man's introductory essay is that it fails to do justice to the complexity of his own vision, which at its best broke free of binary categories like scarcity and abundance, oppression and emancipation. He was never content with formulas. In a profession wedded to the safe and solid he preserved a spirit of in-

tellectual daring. And he carried on the contentious conversation that is the heart of historical discourse. He was sui generis. I shall remember his independent voice rising above the busy hum of professionalism. I learned a lot from Warren Susman, and I shall miss him very much. □

## Freedom's Rider

DAVID J. GARROW

LAY BARE THE HEART: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement. By James Farmer. Arbor House. 370 pp. \$16.95.

Civil rights anniversaries occur frequently now: twenty years since Selma and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, twenty-five since the student lunch-counter sit-ins, thirty since the start of the Montgomery bus boycott. Such occasions, including the annual celebration of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, enable us to commemorate the courage and achievements of the movement, but they also raise an important question: Is the movement's significance for the future being obscured by celebrations that dwell on the least revolutionary aspects of its past?

That danger can be seen not only in Ronald Reagan's belated embrace of the bill designating King's birthday a Federal holiday but also in speeches by Reagan appointees describing the movement as if it sought simply the elimination of racial discrimination, trumpeted a "colorblind" approach to American society and was concerned only with "opportunity" and not with substantive results. According to this view, civil rights activists had won everything on their agenda by 1968. Such a version of history not only mutes the movement's radicalism, it also aids the regressive policies of the current Administration.

James Farmer's beautifully written autobiography is an excellent antidote to this rewriting of history. Consistently frank about his own shortcomings as well as those of others, Farmer, who

served as national director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) from 1961 to 1966, offers a view from the movement's upper reaches. His years of public prominence are described along with the story of his more private and personal disappointments in a way that makes his book both a valuable memoir of a movement and a classic autobiography.

Farmer begins by recounting the Freedom Ride of 1961 which brought CORE to national attention and forced the Kennedy Administration to act when the Freedom Riders were attacked by white mobs in Alabama. He then returns to his beginnings, describing his pleasant and relatively privileged childhood as the eldest son of a peripatetic religion professor whose Ph.D. gave him special status in the black community. Farmer learned early that such rank counted for little in segregated Southern towns like Holly Springs, Mississippi, and Austin, Texas, where he spent his boyhood watching his father quietly accommodate himself to the indignities of racism.

Such experiences increased Farmer's appetite for change. He participated in national Methodist youth conferences, attended the tumultuous National Negro Congress convention at which A. Philip Randolph quit as president, and served as national chair of the Youth Committee Against War. After graduating from Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, and obtaining another degree from Howard University's School of Religion, Farmer moved to Chicago in 1941 as race relations secretary for the Fellowship of Reconciliation (F.O.R.). He was 21.

A few months later Farmer and a white pacifist friend, Jimmy Robinson, discovered that the Jack Spratt Coffee House, a nearby restaurant, refused to serve blacks. Farmer was already drafting a memo to F.O.R.'s executive secretary, the Rev. A.J. Muste, recommend-

*David J. Garrow teaches at CUNY. His book Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1955-1968 will be published next winter by William Morrow.*

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